

We Know Little About Matches

By Joshua Lederberg

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THE PROTECTION of consumers against unwarranted risks is a responsibility spread over a wide range of government departments and regulatory agencies. The disadvantages of this diffusion of authority are only too obvious. It is a pleasure to see an occasional compensation from the exposure of a particular problem to an unusual talent.

The Commerce Department has the responsibility for setting technical standards under the Flammable Fabrics Act of 1967. The task is rather more complex than appears at first sight, but recent prodding from consumerists may help the push for needed regulations against political obstacles as well as technical uncertainties.

In an erudite analysis, Assistant Secretary Myron Tribus has exposed the absurdities of demanding absolute safety at infinite cost, even from the standpoint of minimizing child casualties. If perfect flameproofing is achieved at too high a cost, consumers will simply evade the regulation by making their own garments.

Behind the nitty-gritty of working out a compromise among the discordant interests, some larger issues of social policy are still not yet well resolved.

No one disputes that the government should expose the risks of flammable garments and other common consumer products. How far should it go, however, in compelling the consumer to pay higher costs involuntarily as the price of his own safety?

In a truly free market, the informed self-interest of the "economic man" should be a sufficient guide to proper choices. This model of the consumer does not stand up in a culture where the producers (namely, television advertisers) dominate the most effective channels of communication and information.

Matches Overlooked

THE ESSENTIAL vitality of our free economy then depends crucially on the ability of consumers to organize effectively—to obtain information and exert the leverage of scale—to make the market the ideal place for the balancing of interest. Direct regulation by government agencies may sometimes be more efficient, but a world, dominated by policemen is only a notch better than one run by thieves.

Government must still play an indispensable role, especially in facilitating consumer information. The Consumer Class Action Act, now pending in Congress, would have this side effect as perhaps its most important purpose, for it would allow research on pervasive abuses to be financed and publicized at the prospective expense of the defendant corporate abusers.

Agencies like the Commerce De-

partment and the Food and Drug Administration must also multiply the level of sophisticated research that is so badly needed for the identification of high-priority problems. There are many areas where modest efforts might have a large payoff but are neglected for lack of an organized constituency.

For example, in his analysis of clothing fires, Dr. Tribus pointed out how little we know about how such fires are started. Careful study of matches might thus help to childproof them, with a better payoff in fires prevented, per dollar invested, than by the absolute flameproofing of fabrics. Is anyone doing research on matches today?

The hardest thing to accomplish may be better communication among the various agencies which have different areas of authority and expertise. The Food and Drug Administration has the most crucial responsibilities for the public health and safety with respect to drugs and food additives. It is beset on one side by overwhelming pressures from corporate interests which have made large investments not to be lightly disregarded. On the other, it is bound to an image of "safety" as an absolute ideal beyond reach on this earth.

The agency has, and knows where to get, competent medical advice. It has not, within its limited budget, also housed the orientation and expertise needed for the qualitative analysis of risk in the style of the economist and the mathematical decision analyst.

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